Commentary on the Catholic Epistle of James the Apostle

By Oecumenius (6th Century)

Translated by John Litteral

James writes this to those who were scattered from the twelve tribes and believed in our Lord Jesus Christ. He wrote an Epistle suitable for teaching, teaching about the variety of temptations, which are from God, and which are from the own heart of men: that it is necessary to maintain faith not only in word, but also in deed, and that not hearers of the law, but doers, are justified. He also warns the rich not to be preferred in the assembly of the church to the poor, but rather to be rebuked, as being haughty and proud. And finally, having comforted those who are affected by injury, and exhorted them to be long-suffering until the coming of the Judge, where he also taught about the patient and kind example of Job, he warns the elders to be called upon over the sick, and to strive to convert to the truth those who have been seduced or who err: for he says that the reward of this is from the Lord for the remission of sins: and thus he concludes the Epistle.

CHAPTER 1

With humility and faith, without hesitation or judgment, from the modesty of the mind to the wealthy: in which he also discusses the desire that is within us and the affections that follow it, which is not caused by God: for if there is anything good in us, it is said to be from Him.

1:1 *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are in the dispersion, greetings. Rejoice, my brothers, when you fall into various temptations,*

Indeed, the Son is of the Father, truly the Lord. Therefore, if the servant is equally of the Father and the Son, the Son is equal to the Father in honor, and in essence and in operation. But above all worldly dignity, the Lord's apostles, boasting that they are servants of Christ, want this to be a sign of themselves, both in speaking and writing and teaching. *Rejoice*. He saw these godly sorrows and temptations as commendable and worthy of joy. For these are indeed a strong bond, and an increase of charity and remorse. Hence it is also said: "Son, if you come to serve God, prepare your soul for temptation." (Sirach 2:1) And Christ said: "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer." (Jn. 16:33) and: “Narrow and sorrowful is the path that leads to life.” (Matt. 7:14) For neither without struggle and training can one obtain earthly or divine crowns. But, out of humility about himself, he calls them *brothers*, not sons. Moreover, for the virtuous and diligent, temptations or afflictions are a source of the highest joy, although their testing is evident through them. The trial, however, leads to perfect work. But someone will say: If temptations do this, how does Christ teach us to ask God in prayer not to be led into temptation? (Matt. 6:13) We therefore say that there are twofold temptations or afflictions. Some have their origin from ourselves; others, however, are brought to us by God for the sake of practice and the declaration of victory. There are two things that have their origin from us. Indeed, some, because of their unreasonable courage, which we call reckless boldness, are taught by the Lord to observe this: that the spirit is indeed ready: But that readiness is

extinguished in the midst of struggles, nor does it yield to good in those who use it: but some are brought because of sin, as the destruction of the Sodomites. We should flee these temptations as much as we can, by living without sin. Moreover, those things that are from God, such as those that happened to Job or Abraham, should not be avoided, but rather, if it can be done in any way, they should be embraced through patience and thanksgiving. For God, who tempts, knows how to do this for the benefit and declaration of victory. He said that there are various temptations, because some come from God, as we have said, while others come from ourselves.

1:3-4 *Knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience; but let patience have its perfect work, that your work may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.*

Testing, he says, that which is searched, that which is received, that which is pure: as it is written: "tried in the fire, purified in the earth." (Ps. 11:7) But how does testing produce patience? Because that faith is proven to be pure, which is perfected through patience and endurance of the conditions inflicted. For it is the work of a truly faithful person to receive such desires with patience and thanksgiving: just as Job behaved, who gave thanks in all things (Job 1:1). "*that your work may be perfect*." Notice that he did not say it in the indicative. The work is perfect, but through the imperative, *let [patience] have*. For he does not preach that virtue which preceded it, but that which comes next, and he has determined how it should be done.

1:5-8 *But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without blame, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting. For he who wavers is like a wave of the sea, driven by the winds and swept away by force. For let not that man think that he will receive anything from the Lord. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways*.

He says wisdom is the cause of the perfect work. "*let him ask of God*." Since he knows that the proof of faith and the endurance in afflictions is not the work of any men, but of those who are wise according to God, therefore he urges those who strive to achieve these things towards the pursuit of wisdom. "*he who wavers."* For if he trusts, let him ask; but if he wavers, let him not even ask, because he who does not trust that he will receive, will not obtain. "*like a wave of the sea."* For he who wavers, doubtful about his requests, after having endured for a little while, immediately withdraws. But this happens to him from pride, that he quickly despairs because he does not follow through on what he asks for: since he thinks great things of himself and deserves to be rejected in the request he makes. Moreover, he behaves in the opposite way to one who is of modest mind. "*For let not man think that*," namely, one who asks out of pride and carelessness. Remove from yourself the duplicity of mind, and never waver in your mind when you ask something from God, saying to yourself, "How can I ask and receive anything from the Lord, since I have sinned against Him so often?" Do not think of these things, but turn to the Lord with all your heart, and ask of Him without hesitation, and you will know the multitude of His mercy, which will never forsake you, but will fulfill the request of your soul. For God is not like men, who holds grudges against one another, but He forgets, and He has compassion on His creation. "*A man of double mind*." He calls a man of double mind unstable and not firm, who is never firmly established for the future, nor securely for the present: but is led here and there and carried about: always moving to the future, but never enduring the present. But he also compared such a thing to a wave of the sea, which has neither firmness nor stability: and to a flower of grass, which likewise does not persist, but fades away at the same time as the sun rises. Consider, however, that he did

not say that such a one is likened to a grass, but to a flower of grass, signifying by the flower a very short time. But since he knows that modesty of mind gives birth and is a nurturer of all things, and without this there is nothing excellent in upright and scholarly men, therefore he adds: *Let the brother who is humble glory*, etc. (James 1:9) But how and why was another called double-minded? That he is not established for the present life nor for the future: for life is also called soul, when it is said: "all that a man has will he give as a ransom for his life." (Job 2:4) "*In all his ways*." He means the ways of the mind's emotions by which hope is raised, whether useful or useless, according to what David says: "And you have known all my ways." (Ps. 138:4)

1:9-11 *Let the brother who is humble glory, in his exaltation: But the rich, in that he is made humble: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withers the grass, and the flower thereof falls, and the beauty of its appearance perishes: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways.*

Because he likens the wavering, to a wave driven by the wind, who, being inflated, is exalted together with the winds of the sea, but before he is raised, he prostrates himself and gives himself up: but this very thing happens to the wavering one, who, in spite of his pride, does not confirm his petitions in any of the things that are necessary; therefore he adds: "*Let the brother who is humble glory*." As if he were saying: Whoever wishes to ask for something, let him first ask for what is right, and He will not refuse those who ask. For of these is the kingdom of God and righteousness. (Matt. 6:33) Then let him be tolerant in the petition of such, and let him not depart immediately when he has prayed a little, for that is arrogant; but let him wait until he receives, by enduring with humility. "*Who is humble, in his exaltation*." From humility according to God, all good is bestowed upon us. He calls the rich arrogant and proud, whom he also calls humble, because by the very act of being elevated, he is brought low. "*But the rich, in that he is made humble*." It would have been more fitting for him to say, "But let the rich man be ashamed in his humility," but avoiding saying it in a offensive manner, he added this instead: "*and the beauty of its appearance*." Appearance, that is, face or countenance, He spoke in a critical manner: for this is said of man alone and not of other animals; however, among the quadrupeds, the snout is not called a face. but on birds it is a beak. "*in his ways."* He speaks of ways or paths of the rich, in prosperous success, or business, among which he unexpectedly receives a change to unhappiness and misfortune.

1:12-16 *Blessed is the man who endures temptation: for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him. Let no one who is tempted say he is tempted by God: for God is not a tempter of evils, and he tempts no man. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own conscience. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin: but sin, when it is conceived, brings forth death. Be not deceived, my beloved brethren*.

It seems that this blessed one has made use of the discourse about temptations more securely, in which he says, "Rejoice, my brethren, when you fall into divers temptations." (James 1:2) Then, remembering the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:12), which commands what is best, namely that we pray that we may not fall into temptation, he repeats the discourse: according to what is proposed here, showing what temptation is sent by God, namely, which is also a source for joy, and which is from our will. Yet it can rightly be said that the Lord and God Jesus Christ, looking to the weakness of human nature, admonishes the disciples to flee

temptations, since they were still more badly affected: which he also did to others in many places, meanwhile abstaining from those who perfected them. But after our weak nature was strengthened by the thought of His resurrection and ascension into heaven: His (Jesus) brother (James) according to the flesh teaches us, so that we may not fear temptations, since we can, after being strengthened by the Lord's afflictions, overcome every ensuing affliction and temptation. Since there are twofold temptations, as we have said, patience is useful in both: in those that come from God, because afterwards we attain praise from victory, like Abraham; in those that are from ourselves, because by enduring with gratitude, we refer this as a kind of compensation for the sins we have committed. He who was conscious of his own sins, lays the beginning of his salvation and conforms himself to the form of a righteous man, as the first accuser of himself. "*Let no one who is tempted say*." If there are two kinds of temptations, why does he now reject the cause of all temptation from God? But consider that he does not say: He who was tempted, but he who is tempted. For he who, through his own fault and depravity, gives rise to temptations, so that he is a perpetual slave, says that he is not tempted by God, but by his own desire. He who has overcome the temptation that has come upon him, having established himself more securely, still becomes difficult to tempt, especially by those arising from himself. For having turned towards a wiser life, he has blocked the source of temptations, and now he lives free from temptations. But God cannot be tempted by evil: according to him who said (although he is external to us and alien to faith); Divine and blessed nature neither endures trouble nor inflicts it on others. For around mortal and earthly nature, in which variety and change are evident, all these things that preoccupy our nature occur. Indeed, lust and sin, and the death of the soul that follows from this, have been established as certain stages leading to human perdition. For lust, seizing a place to stay, having found a dwelling place, has wrought sin, which gives birth to death, unless, by removing it from the mind, we renew for ourselves the beginning of another life. Therefore, it sufficiently demonstrates divine nature, neither able to be tempted nor providing temptations to others; however, it says here that thoughts disturb and confuse the splendor of the soul. For those things that are from God greatly soothe the soul, illuminating it and revealing his ineffable beauty in many ways: therefore, he now adds.

1:17-18 *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shadow due to change. In His destined will, He has begotten us by the Word of Truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures*.

"*is from above, from the Father of lights*." Since those things that come from us do not have perfection, but rather much imperfection, nor do they illuminate the soul, think what perfection they will have who acquire it after a joyful journey through life, and with much effort hardly cleanse the ugliness contracted from birth, and then reach divine splendor. "*With whom there is no change*." For He Himself cries out through the prophet: "I am and I do not change." (Mal. 3:6) But what he says: "*shadow due to change*," that is, not even doubt or any shadow of doubt. "*In His destined will*." He said destined will, silencing those who foolishly assert that the world was produced by chance. For since he said above: with whom there is no change, and from this he shows that God is unchanging, he adds: He begot us by his destined will. For if we are born, it is clear that we are also changed. For how could that which proceeds from non-being to being through change be unchangeable? Then, because he said: *He has begotten us*, lest anyone suspect that He has begotten the Son in the same way as us, and that He was born as a Son together with us, he adds: *By the Word of Truth*. For all things, according to blessed John, were made through the Son. (John 1:3) Therefore, if progress has happened to us through the Word of Truth, who have our being from the Word, we are not

begotten together with him from whom we were made. "*That we might be the first fruits*." That is, the first and most honored. But κτίσματα means the visible creature itself.

1:19-20 *Therefore, my beloved brothers, let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*.

What James says is not referred to mere hearing, but to vigorous action in work and to the one who, after hearing, proceeds to perform what he has heard. For he knows that he who listens with interest to what is said will also show himself prepared for their performance: just as, on the other hand, he who is affected by slowness in procrastinating in something, will be completely separated from all effort at work by being distracted. Therefore, in the doctrine of divine things, he prescribes speed, but in those things which have a dangerous administration, slowness. But those are speaking and being angry. For both thoughtless speech and uncontrolled anger never know how to end in good. Because of which a certain divine man once said [Xenocrates]: He often regretted having spoken, but never having remained silent. Again, that blessed David says: "Be angry and do not sin," (Ps. 4:5) that is, lest by being easily angry, you also incite the fury which anger suggests. These things are also similar to what is said here. Indeed, slowness in speaking and slow in becoming angry, preserved by hesitation in these matters, lead to what is decent and right: and either completely dissolve the impulse around these things through deliberate consideration, or teach a suitable way to respond to the occurrences that arise in their course, especially regarding anger; which, if it is induced irrationally, deprives divine justice. And therefore, he adds this reason: *For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*. For if righteousness is a habit in the soul which divides each according to his dignity, but anger, as he says, destroys even the wise, how could this very thing which so darkens the mind with passionate affection as to destroy even the wise, constitute that which divides each according to his dignity? "*Slow to anger*." He wants slowness to be exercised in us in two ways, for example in speaking and in becoming angry. For he knows that hesitation produces abstinence from committing an action.

Of meekness and innocence, and of good actions which lead to happiness, and of knowledge and moderation of speech.

1:21 *Therefore, putting away all filthiness and excess of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*.

He also adds to impurity the excess of nastiness, wishing to demonstrate this: Although someone frequently falls into some impurity, he should quickly depart from it, and not by remaining and lingering in it, through habit do they make the evil stronger and more difficult to cleanse: since those things are born which continually and abundantly find their way into us, to reduce to nature that which is done, or to acquire the habit of nature itself. "*with meekness*." For discipline is conveyed through meekness and not through uproar and disturbance. "*implanted word*." It is called implanted word that which better distinguishes the good from the bad: by which we are also said to be natural.

1:22-25 *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if a man be a hearer of the word, and not a doer: he shall be compared to a man beholding his natural face in a mirror. For he saw himself, and went his way, and immediately forgot what manner of a man he was. But he that has looked in the law of perfect liberty, and has remained in it, not made a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work: this man shall be blessed in his deed*.

Since he knows that some who listen to the word with diligence often extinguish their fervor even at the very time they are listening, therefore, he now adds this, commanding it in effect: Do not show diligence only in hearing, but much more in doing. "*deceiving yourselves*." That is, seducing. Furthermore, he says that the natural face is to know oneself through the law. Therefore, with "*face*," he added "*natural*." For by saying through the law what kind of things we have become, we consider that such things are made by the spiritual law to perfect us through the washing of regeneration. May we not, by remaining in such consideration through action, forget the grace and gift of God. For he who exposes himself to wicked actions does not even remember that he has been favored by God. For if he had remembered that he had been adopted as a son of God and justified and sanctified, which are spiritual gifts, he would never have given himself over to works that repel grace. "*in a mirror.*" From this common mirror he speaks figuratively for an intellectual mirror, without going into detail: for example, he might say in this way: If anyone hears the discourse and does not express it in actions, he is like a man looking at the face of his action in a mirror. For just as he considered himself and went away, immediately forgetting what he was like: so also this one who, through the law of Moses, considered for what purpose he had been made, namely that he had been made for the glory of God and in the image of the Creator God, after he had considered, expressed none of those things that had been considered in actions, but was inclined to go back to the same way he as before. It is not therefore a matter of how it should be used. But James, the disciple of the Lord, does not do this vainly or rashly, but speaks everything briefly, as if he were a disciple of the abbreviated word, and at the same time gathering and restraining the listener, lest he should listen to these things idly. "*But he that has looked in*." Consider what it says: Who has looked in, and not, Who entered. The spiritual law indeed has something magnificent and desirable everywhere, from which it also knows how to attract and render perfect, even from those in wrongful pursuit of it: and since it has perfection and lacks defect in all things, it leaves no one who has attained it in doubt regarding anything that is connected to it; and it persuades those who have even merely looked upon it to remain in it. "*in the law of perfect*." Because the Jews were exalted because of the observances of the law, and thought that by these they showed themselves the highest piety towards God; and devoting themselves to these alone, they claimed perfection for themselves, but towards other men, being moved by a proud and reproachful spirit, they erred. As is evident from the Pharisee, of whom it is written in the Gospel (Luke 18:10), and from those who were scornful against the Publican: repressing this fear, blessed James speaks of the things that are proposed. For indeed, by mentioning his works, which express speech through actions, where he proclaimed him blessed, he immediately corrects the evil that arises from many actions, and says: Do not think that you derive blessedness from the works of the law, as if mere action could render one acceptable before God: not at all; but he is blessed who both acts and is not affected by a scornful or inhumane spirit towards others of his kind. "*of liberty*." Where he had said the perfect Law, he added: of liberty, making liberty his official sign. For the law of Christ, freeing from the servitude of all fleshly things, such as the Sabbaths, circumcision, and ceremonies regarding other purifications, established a liberty and rest for those approaching it: and because of the freedom and sweetness that proceeds from this freedom, it also makes one attentive and liberates from oblivion, which corrupts all good things. For indeed, nothing persuades one to adhere to

something as much as that which seems to offer rest from business and freedom. Moreover, he has also demonstrated this to be blessed. "*a forgetful hearer*." He linked forgetfulness to hearing, because hearing requires action, but no action follows forgetfulness: as if hearing were unessential, which has the ability of action.

1:26-27 *And if any man think himself to be religious not controlling his tongue, but seducing his heart: this man's religion is useless. Religion pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction: and to keep himself pure from the world*.

Religion seems to have something more than faith. For the name itself promises knowledge of certain hidden things and the firmness of those things that are perceived by faith. Therefore, the blessed James also used this expression, saying: Religion, as if he had said: You think you know and precisely observe the secrets that are in the law. How can this happen when you do not know how to restrain your tongue, slandering your neighbor: and living proudly, you do not show mercy to any needy person: when the law neither receives the slanderer (Ps. 100:5) nor commands you to have mercy on your enemies, and even commands that you should be a help to the enemy occupied in lifting up what has fallen under the burden? (Ex. 23:5) If, therefore, you wish to be religious, do not show yourself to be religious from knowledge of the law, but from action, and that by showing mercy to your neighbor: for mercy towards your neighbor is a certain likeness to God. For he says: "Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful." (Luke 6:36) But mercy should not be with respect to persons: for neither does God distribute His benefits (Matt. 5:45) to this one or that one, but involves all with benefit, rich and poor, evil and good, without distinction. However, this is restraint, and not out of arrogance as if it were expressing a law through actions, deceiving one's own conscience: for this signifies the heart, as it is written: "A broken and humbled heart God will not despise." (Ps. 50:19) "*Religion pure*." Perhaps someone will say: If James is the teacher of the covenant which Christ established, how is it that he does not now repeal the things of the law, but rather exalts them, welcoming those who are engaged in its observance, and not rebuking or resisting them from the observance of the law? To that which we say, that in the manner of introducing, he rather now discusses with them, and lowers himself to their weakness, lest by immediately overturning the law from the beginning, he causes them to retreat, becoming weary of the novelty of the doctrines and leaning towards disbelief. However, addressing the matter more conveniently and yielding to the law, regarding those things in which he did not bring harm to the new covenant with the legalistic fallacies (for what harms the faith that is in Christ, such as the observance of sabbaths or fasting or abstaining from certain foods), and making them more attentive to his discourse, he gradually encourages them to indeed depart from the observances of the law, as if they were laborious and yet useless, and as if they were calling to servitude, not to the freedom that is in Christ. Therefore, having wisely used brief exchanges and alternations, when he found that they were no longer seriously bearing what was being said, he then presents those things that were suitable for Christians. " *to keep himself pure from the world*." By "world" here we must understand the popular and common crowd, which is corrupted by the desires of its own error.